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Iraq

The Kurds of Iraq. I

by Squadron-Leader J. C. A. JOHNSON

How the Kurds are changing their ways and beginning to take their place in the modern world is the subject of this and a subsequent article. The verdict of history has been unkind to the Kurds, but, in common with the comparatively few other foreign observers who have visited them and known them individually, Squadron-Leader Johnson is favourably impressed with their intelligence and adaptability and fully recognizes the natural handicaps, notably lack of education, which have hitherto retarded their progress

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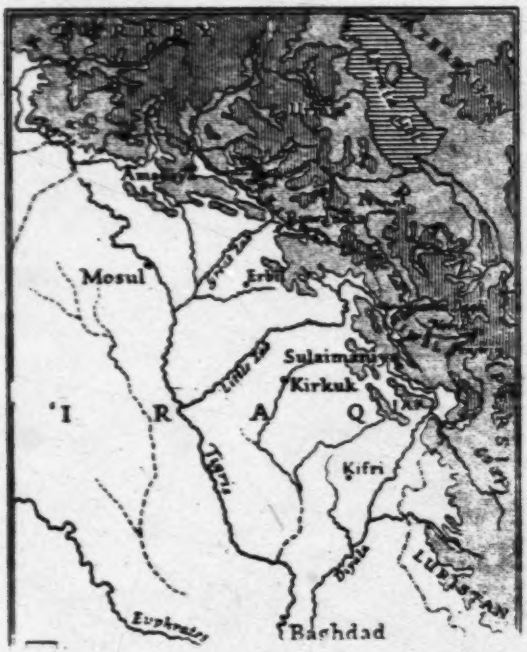
[P.882(A)]

342 I STIRRED drowsily in bed as the chill of the early dawn penetrated my covering of blankets, then rubbed my eyes and slowly became conscious of the world around me. I was lying on the flat mud roof of a house; on all sides other similar roofs appeared. Each had a screen of bamboo matting facing the wind from the nearby hills, and behind it were piles of multi-coloured blankets.

000 The faint light in the eastern sky grew brighter, and the black shadows of the [231] hills turned green as the crowing of cocks and the barking of dogs heralded the approaching dawn. Gradually the piles



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000 of blankets on the roof-tops began to move, then figures rose silently like ghosts from their midst. Above the masses of coloured clothing they wore, I could see the comely faces of women. They began to walk among their piles of blankets and shake sleeping children into wakefulness. These also rose up, wound several yards of coloured cloth around their waists and heads, stretched themselves, yawned, and silently descended rickety ladders to the courtyards below.

291 411 As the sun peeped over the rugged mountains the blankets moved again and men rose from among them, with large black moustaches and bright quick eyes, adding curved daggers to their many yards of waistband; they also disappeared silently below.

438 I gazed over the roof-tops to the sloping plain beyond, where lines of black dots were discernible coming from the pass over the hills. They were caravans bringing wood, tobacco and other produce through the night from distant villages to reach the market by dawn.

515 A few minutes later, when the roof-dwellers had washed their faces in the cold water of their courtyard tanks, the silence of the night ended as shrill screams of women reproaching their offspring broke the still air. Soon afterwards the guttural "*Hetta!*" of the caravanchis was added to the din as they drove their laden donkeys through the narrow lanes between the houses; then loud voices as people shouted down to them asking the latest news and the price of their wares.

000 The night has ended. Sulaimaniya is awake.

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Sulaimaniya, the largest town in Iraqi Kurdistan with an entirely Kurdish population for whom it is an important trading centre. Caravans from over the surrounding hills are always coming and going

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361 Sulaimaniya is the chief town in Iraqi
369 Kurdistan, in that it is the largest town in the Kurdish area whose population is entirely Kurdish. Other towns exist in Iraqi Kurdistan, but the larger ones—Kirkuk, Erbil and Kifri—are inhabited by as many Turcomans as Kurds, although the tribes around are Kurdish. Kurds are essentially shepherds of the mountains, and do not take easily to the life of a townsman.

175 In this they resemble their distant
178 relatives the Pathans of Afghanistan and north-western India, who, in the early migrations of Aryan-speaking peoples, penetrated into the highlands east of the Persian plateau while the Kurds spread westwards into what is now north-western Iran, eastern Turkey and north-eastern Iraq. Here, in secluded mountain valleys, they preserved many ancient characteristics which their fellow migrants, settling

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175 in the Persian plains, lost through contact
178 with the outside world. By the time recorded history begins, Kurds and Persians were already recognized as distinct
[101] peoples, the former being known as Medes.
792 Some 600 years before the birth of
771 Christ and 1200 before the spread of Islam, a Kurdish prophet, Zerdusht (Zoroaster), grew up among the mountains of the Azerbaijan district near the Caspian Sea. The gospel that he preached, in its primitive and simple form, is to a greater extent the basis of Christianity and Islam than the adherents of those world religions usually admit. The Kurd of today, however, knows nothing of this. He is nominally a Mohammedan, and has even on occasions been stirred by the call of "*Jihad*"—the holy war—in the name of Islam. But beneath the surface there lurk some curious remnants of Zoroastrian tradition.

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778 On hills and knolls anywhere in Kurdi-
785 stan may be found a pile of stones under a
782 tree with pieces of cloth tied about it. It is called a *shakhs*, and people who are sick come and sit beside it, perhaps leaving a lamb as a sacrificial offering, or a sum of money which can only be removed by someone really in need of it. By this means they are cured of many diseases.

778 Some say that a shakhs is the grave of a descendant of an Imam. I once asked an old man sitting near a shakhs about its origin.

"My father heard from his father, who learned from our ancestors", he said, "that it is very old. It was here in the days of Mohammed the Prophet, and some

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[291] *Squadron-Leader Johnson in Kurdish dress; Turkish trousers, cut very full from a single width of stuff; a wide, knotted cotton waistband; a loose shirt under a felt tunic, and a turban*

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778 say it was here long before then. It is called the *Shakhs-i-Kani Ba* 'The Spring of the Wind'; in the time of my father's father a great plane-tree stood over it which was blown down by the wind. But then, as always before, when the tree is destroyed another springs up in its place —and that is the one you see there now."

778 In the religion of Zoroaster fire was
771 considered to be the agent which cauterizes and purifies all things, and was regarded as the visible symbol of the God of Purity. Hence it was but a step to endow wood (as the producer of fire), and certain trees, with an atmosphere of sanctity. Thus certain large and solitary trees came to be regarded much as is the shakhs of today. The Zoroastrians even hung pieces of cloth on the branches.

231 Zoroaster commanded that the dog
771 should be protected and cared for by man even as one of his family; the shepherd looks to his dog for defence against wolves and other marauders. The Kurdish nomad of today, although prevented by his creed from sanctifying the dog, still regards it as a useful ally, and almost a friend. In fact the *tanjiy* (a kind of saluki used for hunting) still remains a member of the household. The Kurd saves his Mohammedan conscience by saying that the tanjiy is not a dog, and nowadays to call a man's tanjiy his 'dog' is almost an insult.

231 The Kurds dislike killing dogs. Soon after the Great War stray dogs in Sulaimaniya became such a nuisance that the Political Agent ordered them to be shot; it almost created a riot in the town, and police had to be called out!

197 Travelling among the tribes of Kurdistan one finds a great variety of dialects, but they have a common basic form throughout, especially in the grammar. There is also an affinity between Pushtu (spoken in Afghanistan), and Kurdish—too strong to be classed as a coincidence. By the casual, or politically-biased, philologist. Pushtu and Kurdish are desig-

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Kurdistan landscape. The citadel of Amadiya, a Kurdish stronghold, stands on the flat-topped hill to the right protected by a rampart built up from the rock which crowns the precipitous hillsides

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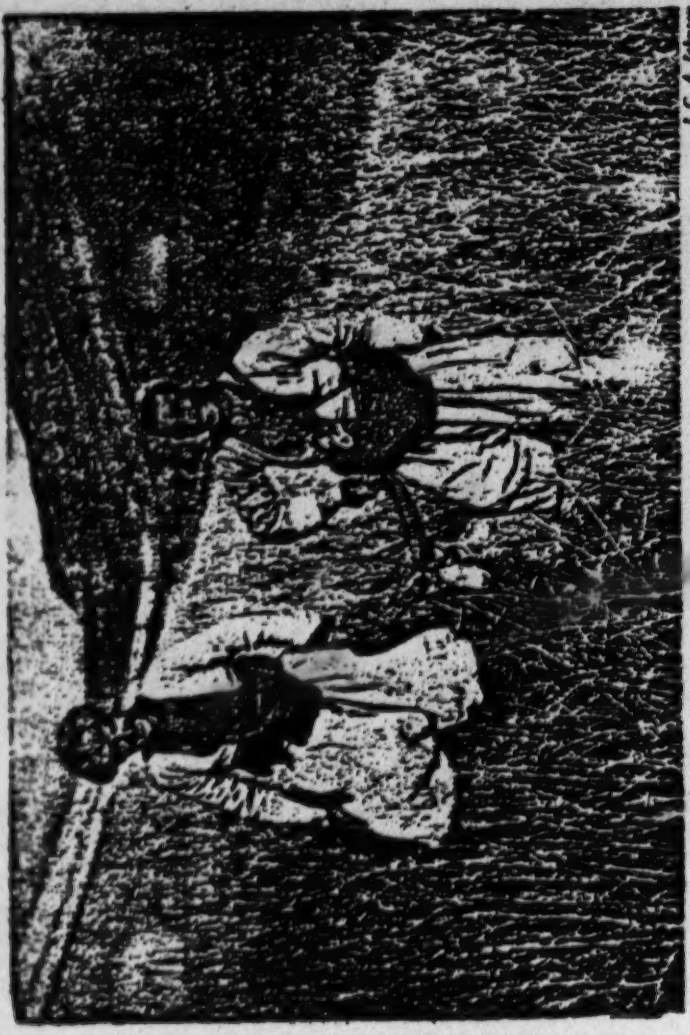

The Kurds are great sportsmen. Even when they have not killed the game themselves, their pleasure after a successful shikr is unmistakable: this ibex was shot by Squadron-Leader Johnson

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H. L. Cowie

Among Zoroastrian traditions which have lingered on with the Kurds is the prophet's command that the dog should be cared for as one of the family. But their Moslem faith now forbids such sanctification; so to absolve their conscience they cherish the creature under another name and are accordingly insulted if their tanjiy, a kind of saluki, is referred to as a 'dog'

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197 nated as corrupt dialects of Persian. The relation between them is made clear, however, by a knowledge of the migration of Aryan-speaking peoples in the Middle East; moreover the speech of the mountain races, and especially of the Kurds, retains more of the original Sanskrit form through their isolation from the outer world. So Kurdish is one of the oldest forms of the Aryan tongue spoken at the present day.

Further proof that Kurdish is not a dialect of Persian is given by the Zaza dialect spoken by the Kurds of Turkey and the northern border of Iraq, which bears little resemblance to Persian. The greater the distance of the habitat from Persia, the less does a Kurdish dialect resemble Persian, although its relation to other Kurdish dialects will still be evident.

Kurdish has, prior to the last eighteen years, never been a written language, so

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no standard form has been brought into general use; but there is little more difference between the several dialects of Kurdish than between the spoken Arabic of different branches of the Arab race. Arabic, moreover, has had the advantage of being standardized in writing, and to some extent in speech, by the spread of the Koran during the past 1000 years.

Semitic languages are based on consonants while Kurdish is based on vowel sounds. Thus the meaning of a Kurdish word may be entirely altered by a slight change in its pronunciation, including minute inflexions of certain vowels which are not recognized in most of the other Aryan languages. It is for this reason that, as in Pushtu, it is almost impossible for a foreigner to acquire a perfect pronunciation. As with other Kurdish peculiarities, the cause may be traced to the

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137 habitat. Voices developed to shout from peak to peak across intervening valleys acquire inflexions to accentuate or suppress the echo of certain sounds, which can never be imitated by the plainsman.

162 There are about half a million Kurds in Iraq, a figure which represents only a fraction of the race; Turkey holds some three million and Iran at least one million. In the last-named country a reliable estimate is difficult to obtain owing to the widely separated areas reached by wandering tribes. Apart from these in the north-west, the mountainous country on the western border is peopled by Kurds as far south as Luristan. The north-eastern province of Khuzistan also holds some Kurdish tribes; while certain tribes in Baluchistan may also be of Kurdish origin.

168 From the time when groups of Aryan-
186 speaking families settled in secluded valleys until the present century, Kurdish tribes were cut off from each other and from the outside world by their mountains and by the fighting spirit of their primeval ancestors, who each regarded his own particular valley as his home, and any newcomer as an enemy who must be killed before he himself was overwhelmed. When man began to keep flocks and herds for domestic uses, the tribal exclusiveness was exaggerated by the need to prevent outsiders from sharing the limited areas of good grazing available among the rocky hills.

169 Intermarriage within the tribe has en-
182 hanced physical resemblances to such an extent that in many cases it is possible to distinguish a man's origin by his face as well as by the way he wears his headgear and his dialect. But there is no sign of this close blood-relationship having caused physical degeneration. The Kurd has been truly described as having the highest physical development of any race in the Middle East.

187 I have on occasion been out shooting with a Kurdish chief on the wrong side of seventy years of age, who rode a long way

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147 climbed on foot up the steep hillsides with an agility quite equal to my own. On another occasion I saw a villager alleged to be 120 years old, whose age must certainly have exceeded 100 years. He had a son aged ten by a wife whom he had married in later life. This healthy
571 longevity is the result of simple and clean living, which is common in Kurdistan.

187 To the stranger the Kurd may appear
181 dour and surly—like the Scot—but within his exclusive circle he is smiling and talkative with a childlike lack of discretion: the greatest secret is common knowledge within the tribe. The Kurd has learned

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A Kurdish agha, *or chieftain, from Barde-shin. Short and stocky, he has the gait of a man who was able to ride before he could walk*

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F. C. A. Jameson

An agha of the Pizhdar tribe on his favourite mare. Among the Kurds an agha holds the position of a feudal baron, offering to the serfs the protection of armed guards and receiving in return various taxes. He will always ride a mare in preference to a horse because it is quieter and more manageable. Pedigree horses are kept by the tribe for breeding purposes; the others are used as pack animals.

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Two Pizhder warriors from the agha's bodyguard. These men are regarded as personal retainers and therefore they rank higher than serfs. Each man has his own horse and rifle

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181 to be cunning in action because his
157 preservation has always required action. On the other hand, until recently he seldom conversed with those who were not of his tribe or family, and therefore the keynote of his speech is simplicity; the real 'savage' Kurd scarcely knows how to lie, and when he does he lies badly.

When a Kurd becomes tied up with words, or the cunning put into words which is the mainspring of bureaucratic 'civilization', he may momentarily feel that he is being tricked by something he does not understand, then, as we say, he 'sees red'. He suddenly realizes the futility of words, and leaps to action behind the sharp edge of a dagger or the trigger of his rifle. Thus through a purely natural evolution caused by his environment the Kurd has acquired, among those who do not understand him, an unsavoury reputation for ferocity, treachery and lack of balance.

000 The Kurdish tribesman has a childlike

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The Kurdish tribesman has a childlike
157 sense of humour. Like a child, too, he
609 unconsciously appreciates sympathy and an understanding of his psychology. It is partly because ruling races were indifferent to such considerations until the evolution of British colonial policy in backward countries that the Kurd has been accustomed to regard every foreign power as an enemy to be driven off or exterminated before he himself suffers a similar fate.

181 Like other mountain peoples the Kurds
175 are a martial race, but owing to their separate communities and 'clannishness' they have never featured as such in modern history. The only Kurdish kingdom known to Europe is the ancient kingdom of the Medes. Nevertheless the Kurds have produced many great individual soldiers. First and foremost comes Cyrus the Great, who united the Medes and Persians and in 538 B.C. conquered Babylon. Others have found fame as

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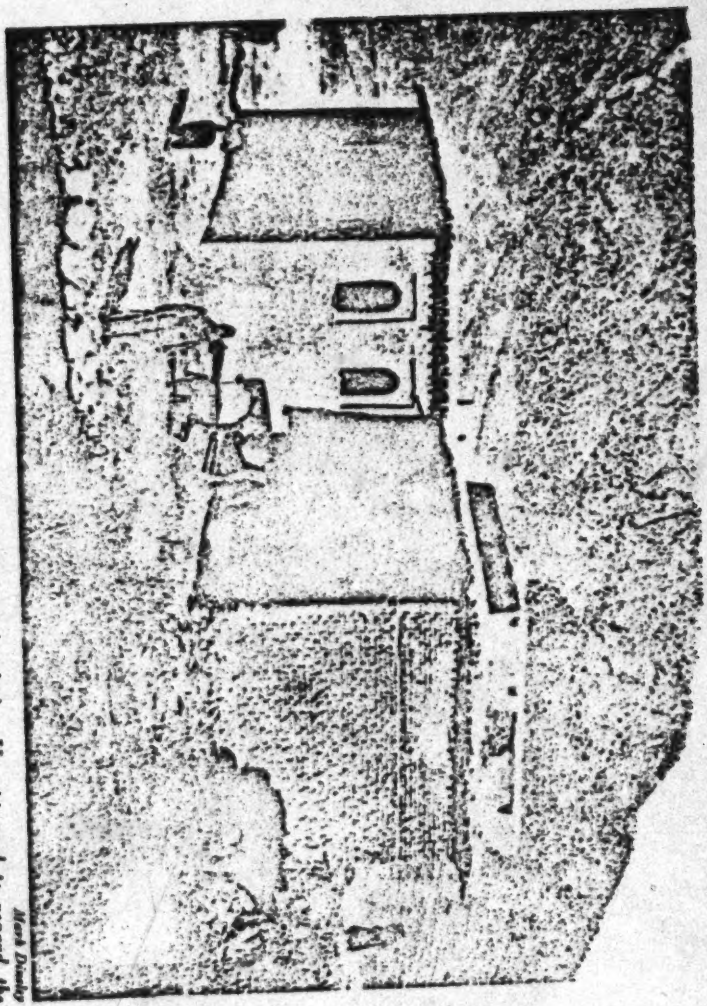

The house of an agha, rebuilt after his village had been bombed. He appeared to regard the incident with amusement and incorporated fragments of shell in the decoration of his new home

Mark Darby

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leaders in Moslem armies. from Saladin (Salah ad Din) in the hosts that opposed the Crusaders, to the late Bekr Sidqi in the army of Iraq; but they have never drawn attention to their Kurdish origin, as the name 'Kurd' implies a shepherd, which in the East is considered a lowly occupation not worthy of great men.

Some have carved for themselves small kingdoms among the tribes of their own race. But that very martial spirit which makes the Kurd proud and independent, and forbids him to acknowledge the sovereignty of anyone outside his tribe for long, has prevented the Kurds from becoming united under any one chief and thus imprinting their name on the history of the world.

In the history of the new state of Iraq individual Kurds have already made their impression. The best-known is Shaikh

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721 Mahmud of Sulaimaniya, whose several rebellions against the British earned him the unofficial title of 'Director of Training of the R.A.F.' He gave the Royal Air Force practice in operations spread over twelve
726 years. The British method of limited air bombardment after due warning suits the ideas of the chivalrous Kurd in war: to the Kurd it is one of the things that are 'not done' to kill too many people. Shaikh Mahmud and his merry men would set off on the warpath and fight for a few months until they began to suffer discomforts, then give in until the restless highland spirit once more urged them on.
727 Sometimes people got killed, but that was one of the misfortunes of the game. During one rebellion, when a British aircraft was brought down near Penjwin, Shaikh Mahmud captured its two occupants and held them prisoner for a fort-

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727 night. When they became sick he gave a British doctor safe-conduct through his mountains to succour them. The doctor told Shaikh Mahmud that they could not hope to get fit suffering the hardships of life among the Kurds; so the chivalrous Shaikh released them both, and allowed the doctor to take them back with him.

I remember visiting the village of Hama Rashid, Agha of Norik, chief of the Siwêl tribe, who had at one time thrown in his lot with the restless Shaikh Mahmud. As a result his village had been bombed. I was seated on the ground in the moonlight while the chief and his sons and followers sat around with their rifles ready to defend me should any sporting bandit start sniping from the nearby hills; they described to me the bombing of their village.

726 They laughingly related how they had
727 been warned that their village would be bombed until they gave in—or made their

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726 *dakhalat* (as it is called). They described
727 in stirring tones how they retired to some caves a couple of hundred yards from the village and watched the bombs falling on their homes. The only fly in the ointment was that it was their own houses being destroyed and not somebody else's. Apparently they regarded the affair with some amusement, and themselves as naughty boys who had been punished by having to rebuild their houses afterwards. It had taken them two months' hard work to rearrange the village before the onset of winter; so they decided that in future they would not be led astray by promise of excitement unless they were on the side of the British.

527 Another example of the sporting spirit
857 of the Kurds and their disregard for safety is shown in the great sling fights which take place between the children of adjacent villages or of different parts of

[text continued on p.392(A)]

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Inside a Kurdish guest-house. The guests are all men; it is unusual for women, though they go about freely and unveiled, either to appear or to be spoken of at public gatherings.

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526 the town. At intervals they go outside
857 the houses armed with slings and stones. Sometimes as many as fifty boys of all sizes and ages may gather on each side. They commence a great battle, hurling stones at each other with their slings until one side finds the fighting too fierce and beats a retreat. Woe betide the passing stranger who unwittingly walks across 'no man's land' while a battle is in progress!

Now that football has been introduced in Kurdistan the time-honoured battles with slings are being forgotten. Except in the summer, when it is too hot for violent exercise, they rarely take place, the majority of the time being taken up in kicking footballs about. The Kurds have taken to football like ducks to water. In the afternoons, when school is finished, every

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The two elder sons of Hama Rashid, Agha of Norik, who entertained the author with a stirring account of the bombing of their village

[p. 392 (b)]

square yard of uncultivated ground around the town is used for this game. Those who cannot find space in other parts run up and down the streets playing football.

The social system of the Kurds is essentially feudal. Up to recent times no man could prosper or even feel safe unless under the protection of a powerful agha, whose armed retainers guarded the *miskin* (serfs) from any who might attempt to tyrannize the village. In return for this the agha exercised an overlordship, collecting a percentage of the crops, a fee for marriages, and other taxes. He called out the villagers to fight an enemy when required, and was generally in the position of a feudal baron of ancient England.

An agha used his family as the basis of his power. He produced as many sons as possible, who would be loyal to him in an extremity, and put each in charge of a village, or group of villages, to unite them in the common cause when necessary. If sufficiently powerful he might bring other villages under his control by the simple expedient of annexing them from less powerful protectors. Thus in many Kurdish tribes there is no blood relationship between the aghas and the miskēn, but the aghas are of a common descent.

Another important feature in the social system is the shaikhs. Among the Arabs the term 'shaikh' signifies a tribal chief but in Kurdistan a shaikh is a holy man. Certain shaikhly families have acquired the title because they claim descent from the Prophet Mohammed, in which case it corresponds to the title of *sayyid* among other Mohammedan peoples; other shaikhs are holy men, but do not claim such ancestry. Not unnaturally the former class is the more influential and powerful.

It is unfortunate that a number of the shaikhs have not contented themselves with the religious welfare of the people. Like the priestly class throughout the world, they have at times used religious influence to increase material power, and become analogous to powerful tribal

A party of rubber going off to work accompanied by an armed guard able to retaliate against raiding bandits

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793 ughan. But on account of the veneration
in which they are held they can usually
exercise influence in circumstances
where that of an agha has begun to wane.

794 One day when I was sitting under a
119 leafy bower on the roof of a well-known
sheikh's house a terrific squall of wind and
rain suddenly arose. For a moment it
seemed as if the thick tree-trunks which
formed the framework of the shelter would
be torn from their foundations. A sheikhly
relative, seeing the fear on the faces of his
wife, smiled benevolently, saying:

"Hoosh oot! I will place my hands upon
the tree, and lo, it will not fall."

Suiting the action to the word, he
leaned his weight against the tree, and
indeed it did remain standing.

For a moment the overwhelming reli-
gious tension in the atmosphere was such
that I could scarcely refrain from echoing
the murmurs of veneration which rose
from the lips of the men around. I could

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730 Quite understand how men born and bred
in this village under the eye of their shaikh
719 could not but regard him as possessing
superhuman powers.

621 In modern Iraq the power of the shaikhs
622 and aghas has been curtailed. The
villager still works under his agha as the
732 owner of the land—the only one, in fact,
who is competent to organize and super-
vise the work of the village; but the
simplest villager now realizes that all the
power of his agha or holiness of his shaikh
will avail him "tlle should he unwisely be
persuaded to act contrary to the law.

900 Certain individual Iraqis who cannot
claim tribal ancestry talk glibly of "break-
ing up the tribes" and "exterminating the
aghas" as has been done in some other
countries, but on the whole the Iraq
government treats the matter with greater
foresight and seeks mainly to 'break' those
chiefs who use their influence against the
government.

[p. 393(c)]